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ABSTRACT

Case studies of the writing habits exhibited by anxious and nonanxious writers in workshops to reduce writing apprehension and in regular literature/composition classes have revealed how certain aspects of the composing processes of anxious writers differed from those of nonanxious writers. Some of the common problems were the lack of structured writing times, procrastination, and distractions. The writers who overcame their problems often needed help only to organize their writing tasks into discrete steps or to budget their time properly. Such case studies are theoretically and pedagogically useful to writing teachers, because they can show discrepancies between writers' perceptions of their effectiveness and their actual performances throughout their writing processes. When teachers record naturalistic observations of writers at work, they invite self-evaluation by anxious writers to modify work habits and streamline the writing process. In this way, students' writing apprehensions decrease, and some of them learn to enjoy writing.
 (RL)

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The Composing Processes of Anxious and Non-Anxious Writers:

A Naturalistic Study

Writing anxiety plagues between 10-25 percent¹ of college students, men and women alike, and countless others who, though functioning as well as anyone else in other respects, cannot write comfortably -- if at all. Given a problem of this magnitude, it is useful to examine the composing processes of such writers, and to compare how they write with the composing processes of non-anxious writers. What can we learn from how each group writes that will be of benefit to the writers therein? Are there significant and consistent differences between the ways anxious and non-anxious writers work? Can a knowledge of the processes of their non-anxious peers help the anxious writers write with greater ease and efficiency? This paper will attempt to answer these questions.

The information is derived from several sources:

1. My observations of several anxious and non-anxious writers -- undergraduates in writing and literature courses, graduate students in various fields, while they were writing or trying to write.

2. My analysis of the commentary, self-study, and (in some cases) writing performance of participants in workshops on Reducing Writing Anxiety² which I have conducted at Washington University (St. Louis) and the College of William and Mary, 1977 - present.

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3. My analysis of the commentary, self-analysis, and writing performance of anxious and non-anxious students in my freshman and advanced writing courses at the College of William and Mary (1978 - present), supplemented by observations of my basic freshman writing students at the University of New Mexico, 1978.

The participants in the case studies were observed in more than one category. A student in the Writing Anxiety Workshop would later enroll in one of my writing courses, where I learn how students write through an early paper on "My Writing Process," bi-monthly conferences about their writing, and the usual informal observations and continuing discussions that occur between teacher and students throughout the semester.

At the outset of the investigation I determined which writers were highly anxious and which were not through several measures. High overall scores on the Daly and Miller twenty-six item measure of Writing Apprehension³ usually indicate very high writing anxiety with its host of related problems;⁴ very low overall scores usually indicate the converse. This is largely an attitudinal measure.

If the writer's scores fell within the normal range (on a bell curve), I used a combination of personal observations of the writer, the writers' self-reports, a behavioral emphasis; and high scores on four or more of the following items from the Writing Apprehension scale. These almost invariably point to writers with problems related to anxiety:

1. I avoid writing.
2. I am afraid of being evaluated.
7. My mind goes blank when I start to write a composition.
13. I'm nervous about being evaluated.
16. I can't write my ideas clearly.
21. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas.
23. It's hard for me to write a good composition.
24. I don't think I write as well as others.
25. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.

Of this list, items 1 (procrastination), 2 and 25 (fear of evaluation), and 21 (difficulty with organization) are the most revealing indicators.⁶ Even here, however, some anxious writers may be deceiving themselves; two of the ten I have studied most intensively say that they seldom "avoid writing," when I know from their performance in my advanced writing class that they are intermittent procrastinators. In fact, one still owes me a term paper from a previous course.

The average score of a random sample of the anxious writers studied here⁷ is 71 --20.4 points higher than the average score of a random sample of the non-anxious writers studied here, 50.6. Yet many of the anxious writers' scores were in the 50s--as were many of the scores of the non-anxious writers. For individuals, sums of the scores are themselves insufficient as predictors if they fall much below 75--which would imply an average score of 3 out of 5 on every item.

Yet, as my observations have indicated and the case studies below will reveal, certain aspects of the composing processes of the anxious writers differ considerably from those of the non-anxious writers, even though their Writing Apprehension scores may be comparable. For the purposes of this study (and also as a teacher or workshop instructor trying to help the students to write well, with efficiency and ease), I have sought as total, naturalistic view of the students' behavior before and during writing as possible. This has included information about whether or not they got down to work immediately or put it off, whether they were self-distracting or easily distracted by others, and were uneasy or calm while writing, among other aspects. I also tried to obtain information on the time, method, and effort the participants expended in invention, prewriting, organizing materials, writing the opening paragraph and/or various individual sentences, writing the preliminary and however many succeeding drafts, editing, revising, and reviewing their writing during the composing process.⁸

Because this is a naturalistic study, rather than one in which the participants write under laboratory conditions on an assigned topic for a fixed and uniform period of time, usually under the watchful eye, if not the videotape camera, of the investigator,⁹ it has not been possible to systematize the data. I have chosen instead to present the material through case studies grouped by type, anxious writers (and sub-groups) and non-anxious writers--and then to analyze these to obtain some general understanding of the questions under investigation. Had we but money enough, and time, it would be interesting to investigate the composing processes of anxious and non-anxious writers using controlled conditions and see whether the results were comparable. My guess, on the basis of existing evidence, is that they would be; future research will tell.

First, a look at the anxious writers, who may be divided into three categories. Intransigents, who comprise about 12% of the participants in the Writing Anxiety Workshops, do not and will not write anything. Intermediates, who comprise about 25% of the Workshop participants, can be helped to do some kinds of writing but not others. The Fully Responsive participants, about 50% of the total, eventually will write anything, often with gusto.

I will start with the most intransigent cases, two men who, although nominally requesting advice about how to get started with writing tasks of considerable magnitude, rejected all suggestions and at last report had not yet begun to write. Curtis (the names have been changed to protect the innocent--or guilty, depending on one's view of such people!), a college junior, came to the Workshop late in the spring semester at the prodding of a professor who realized that Curtis had received incompletes in two courses the preceding semester because he hadn't written term papers, and was on the verge of another incomplete in the current semester for the same reason.

Curtis was a smiler; he smiled continually throughout the Workshop sessions. In the Workshops I, in a fashion that is seen (I hope) as kindly but firm, subject the participants to a heavy dose of reality--essentially to help them eliminate

the myths that inhibit their writing--such as "Writing is easy for everyone but me," when in fact writing is work for almost everyone, amateur or professional. Included in this is a question particularly painful for chronic procrastinators, "What will be the short and long range consequences if you do not finish your writing?" Curtis smiled his reply, "I will get more incompletes." Upon further questioning he acknowledged that yes, ultimately these might metamorphose into F's. However, he never would admit that a string of F's would prevent him from graduating and would keep him out of law school, to which he smilingly said he craved admission. Given such problems, the other Workshop participants asked him why he appeared so pleased. He smiled in reply and faded away like the Cheshire Cat, never to return to confront his failure to write. We had carefully worked out a day-by-day time schedule (including vacations) that would have enabled Curtis to finish all the writing within two months. He was to provide both me and his instructors with brief progress reports. But he made no progress, did no writing, and the inevitable consequences ensued. You can lead someone to the writing desk, but you can't make him think.

So for Curtis the composing process (in such cases I think of it as de-composition) consisted of procrastination, avoidance, and self-deceit for months at a time. This was also true of Marlon, a belligerent and highly defensive Master's candidate in Marine Science, who had been not writing his thesis for seven years. With the deadline three months away, he enrolled in the Workshop in which a number of his peers and several of his professors were also participants. He claimed that higher priorities continually impinged on his writing: a new baby, a house, fatigue from working all day at a research job, participation three nights a week in a volunteer rescue squad.

When his fellow students suggested that for a three-month period he could give his writing the highest priority, he angrily retorted that if he did, his house, his baby, and the rescue squad would fall apart. To the response that if

he didn't give his thesis the highest priority his career might fall apart, he launched into a defensive, "I-can-get-along-without-it; I'm-already-treated-like-a-professional," unshakeable even by his professors' predictions of the dead end he would eventually reach. During the Workshop series Marlon did come up with a time schedule and a scratch outline, a skimpy half-page for a hundred-page thesis. Six weeks ago the deadline had passed and he was negotiating for an extension--
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 but still not writing.

The intermediates consist of three other anxious writers, grouped here because of some similarities in their writing problems and writing processes, the graduate students, Amy, Jeanne, and Linda. All wrote well--when they wrote; Amy and Linda had had articles published. All were perfectionists but uncertain of how to attain their ideal writing. All had large amounts of uncommitted, unstructured time, which proved detrimental to their writing processes because they were free to procrastinate for extensive periods. They also had unlimited time to spend on the writing they did do--so they expanded far too much to accomplish far too little. And all, with help, eventually grew able to write short papers, articles, and reports with reasonable efficiency--but at this writing cannot finish long papers.

Three semesters ago Jeanne had spent a month writing a two-page summary of a twenty-page journal article. Unconvinced that her first draft was acceptable, she kept rewriting and rewriting, draft after draft. After devoting ninety-eight hours to the project, she turned in the first version (which she accurately determined was the best), earned an A-, and signed up for the Writing Anxiety Workshop. Together we worked out a realistic time schedule. We blocked out the various stages of a suitable composing process--gathering ideas, organizing them, writing the first and next two drafts (not more for Jeanne, who needed a limit), editing, and typing the paper. We allocated twice as much time for each stage as more comfortable and efficient writers usually spend--and were still

able to reduce Jeanne's working time on the next paper to a manageable fifteen hours.

This semester, in fact, she is taking a course that requires one short paper a week, and has no difficulty in completing the assignments, which are highly structured. She also wrote a thirteen-page paper in two days, after spending two weeks on the preliminary reading. As long as she can follow a predetermined format and time schedule, Jeanne can overcome her inclinations both to put off the task and to let the writing effort expand to fill the time available. Parkinson's law applies to writers as well as to bureaucrats!

But long papers remain her Waterloo. Last semester she took a required course, with a major project of a fifty- to sixty-page paper, on which she was expected to work throughout the semester. Because of her apprehensiveness about its length, she knew that she would put off the writing, and she lived up to her self-fulfilling prophecy--a particular form of devastation for anxious writers. To watch her write I visited her, by prearrangement, three weeks before the paper was due. She had completed an outline of the entire paper and a fifteen-page segment of its text, essentially a revision of a paper written for another course. At this point, feeling under considerable pressure, she was debating three choices: to drop the course (which she would then have to repeat, since it was required); to quit her three-day-a-week job so she could have more time to write (but she needed the money); or to finish the paper on time (she decided to finish it).

Although after a brief discussion of these alternatives I was prepared for her to sit down and begin to write, she was not, and for an hour she prolonged the preliminaries. She showed me her new house. She offered me coffee. She told me about her family and inquired about mine, even though by this time I was signalling with my pen poised over notepad that it was time to get down to business. She put the dog out. She had invited me to lunch and suggested that we eat before she began to write. I demurred, knowing that she had an appointment

after lunch; if she didn't write before then her paper would once again be postponed to that manana which might or might not ever arrive.

Finally she took me to her writing room, a large, sunny bedroom where her books and papers were neatly arranged on a bookcase, her typewriter stood expectant on a card table, and an atmosphere of tranquility prevailed. Externally. Internally she was clearly apprehensive, paced around the room for awhile, sat down, got up, sat down again and fidgeted with her pencils. She finally turned toward me (I was sitting behind her, where she couldn't see me when she was writing) and told me that she had spent two hours earlier that morning writing an eight-line poem that was to conclude the paper. I asked her whether the poetry writing was a form of procrastination, but she said that she had recently begun to discover that she has the "right" to write poetry (which she had long wanted to do, but thought it frivolous) and has begun to take it seriously as a genuine mode of personal expression. I agreed, keeping my replies brief, as I had been throughout the morning so as not to encourage her self-distraction.

When Jeanne finally did start to write, she wrote rapidly in longhand, pausing briefly for thinking, and crossing out occasional words. She wrote one page (approximately one hundred words) every five minutes, and sustained this for twenty minutes, ignoring the sounds of someone coming in downstairs. She appeared equally oblivious to my presence, except to ask me after she had completed three pages whether she should revise her writing before she proceeded. I asked her how long she would be likely to spend on the revision; she replied, "An hour," so I suggested that since the ideas were flowing she continue with the first draft. This she did for another fifteen minutes, her growling stomach indicating that she was ready for lunch. Thus out of an hour and forty minutes, she had actually written for thirty-five.

Over lunch we worked out a fifty-hour-a-week writing schedule for the next two weeks, detailing on the basis of her outline and demonstrated writing speed how much and what kind of writing Jeanne should expect to do every day, and allowing eight hours extra for the typing. I⁹ asked her to call me with a

weekly progress report, and left to expressions of mutual optimism. But she never called, though, ten days later I saw her by chance in the library (reading additional sources for her paper) and she assured me all was going well.

I learned the discouraging truth this week. Jeanne did stick to the schedule for the first week, after which "personal problems" of an unspecified nature intervened. She decided that because the instructor had said at the beginning of the semester that he would not give incompletes, she would have to drop the course. But when she went in to tell him this, he offered her an extension. Three months later, despite a month's break for midyear vacation and a week of spring vacation, she still has not finished the paper--but expects to after the semester has ended. I have suggested that she see each long paper (with which she can't cope) as a series of interrelated short papers (with which she can cope); we'll see whether this helps.

Because Amy's and Linda's writing problems and practices are similar to Jeanne's, they do not need elaboration here. Both, like Jeanne, write short papers rapidly and with ease, using processes similar to those of non-anxious writers (to be discussed below). In fact, both of them, students of mine this semester as they were last semester, find that the prospect of writing a long' paper, whether self-generated or imposed by the instructor, stimulates them to use the writing of numerous short papers as a "constructive" form of procrastination. Indeed, they write a great many more short papers when under pressure to produce a long one than they do when a long paper is not looming on the horizon. As long as they're writing something, that's good--right?--and their work on that effectively interferes with the more lengthy writing they can thus "legitimately" postpone.

I continue to think that the solution, to break the larger task into a series of discrete though interrelated shorter segments, with an appropriate time schedule for the completion of each part, will eventually enable such task-specific anxious writers to finish their writing. Further investigation will reveal

whether this is so.

the Fully Responsive Participants,
Four other anxious writers, Ann, Mark, Hal, and Debra, are grouped here because though they put off writing assignments until the last minute and suffer considerable anguish when they do write, they manage to finish their work on time, but without much satisfaction. Because of their humanities majors, all have assumed the recurring obligation of writing a large number of papers. They write reasonably well; all could write better if they employed a more effective process. Although they differ in some other important respects, for purposes of analysis we will concentrate on the similarities.

Debra's writing process is typical of this group's, and her attitude toward it is expressed clearly in this commentary written during the second week of the semester:

I am forced to procrastinate when I write a non-fiction paper because of my school, work, and home schedule. Fortunately for me delaying the inevitable is my best writing tool. I find that I am most creative and effective when my energy level is high and my mind can focus on the matter immediately at hand. Otherwise I will even go so far as to clean the bathroom to avoid writing. A time limit also keeps me from losing my self-confidence and in turn editing, editing and chopping, sure in my mind that anything would be better.

The only part that doesn't leave me an insomniac is researching any facts I might need, so I get that done almost immediately after the assignment is given. I think out and jot down my major ideas and then put it totally aside until about 12-24 hours before the assignment is due.

If the paper is due on Monday, during the last two hours on my Sunday job I write a very rough draft of the total assignment. On the way home I think over what I've written and make mental changes. D-DAY. I gather my cigarettes, tea, paper and sit down Indian-style in my favorite chair. I then light the first of the more than forty cigarettes I will smoke while writing and give into writing my second draft without looking at the first. This takes anywhere from two to four hours.

Now it's time to balance my checkbook or anything that will sober my light head. One half hour later, somewhere between 10 p.m. and midnight, I take a sober look at the essay and edit in any changes I feel will clarify my ideas. This takes between a half hour and an hour. I now commit my words to the typewritten page, cross my fingers and seal my fate.

Here Debra, like other anxious writers, refuses to take the responsibility for her own procrastination; her other obligations at school, work, and home "force" her to put off her writing. Yet, as the second paragraph indicates, she willingly does the part of the assignment she enjoys, "researching any facts I might need . . . almost immediately after the assignment is given." She would rather perform the most distasteful of menial tasks, "cleaning the bathroom," than to actually begin to write any earlier than she has to; "has" for Debra is defined by the deadline rather than any internal compulsion. To think about writing before the last minute is so painful and perplexing that she believes it will make her "lose self-confidence." Whereas, if she leaves the writing until just before it's due, the rush keeps her from having time to doubt her initial judgments, and to make changes as a consequence. This is evidently an a priori view, because she does in fact edit and revise her second draft, just before she types it.

Hal's commentary about why he procrastinates expresses the views of the entire group of Fully Responsive Participants:

It's not that I don't enjoy putting my feelings and thoughts into words. I like to write about things that mean a great deal to me. When I'm writing something down for my own personal satisfaction, I feel good.

However, I don't like to write when I know other people will read it. I always feel it is going to be stupid. The teacher won't like it, my grade will show my poor writing capabilities, and the class will laugh at it. I always think everyone has written a better composition than I have. This also puts writing on my "hate" list.

These students in fact enjoy writing for their own satisfaction, without the threat or fear of an external audience. But they are very fearful of outside readers, whom they expect (often irrationally) to dislike their writing and to judge them as "stupid."

This fear may also account not only for their reluctance to start to write but also to revise. As Hal says:

I try to make my rough [first] draft be as best as I can so I don't have to do much revising. So I get scared to put some things down if they don't really have the most exact grammar or the proper usage of the parts of speech.

My revisions leave much to be desired. I don't really do that much revising. I suppose I consider it to be too much work and thought. I don't like to switch paragraphs, sentences, and words around to make it sound more like a coherent unit instead of mush.

If such writers see the whole process of writing for an audience as negative and painful and doomed to ridicule, why put any more effort into the actual writing when they have to meet the requirement? If on the first draft they have stuck to "safe" expressions because they're afraid they'll fail if they try something of which they're uncertain, why revise? In this negative view, revision just gives these writers more opportunities to make mistakes.

Yet my experience indicates that such writers, for whom some aspects of writing are already pleasurable, can be reached through thoughtful teaching. The class can operate in an atmosphere of encouragement, rather than ridicule. Students can receive up-beat suggestions in the margins of their papers, rather than rivers of blood. They can confer individually and positively with the instructor. In such a supportive climate, most of them will gradually get the message that writing isn't as threatening or self-destructive as they may have found it in environments where "the teacher won't like my writing and the class will laugh at it."

Moreover, since even such anxious students usually "enjoy writing about things that mean a great deal to me," they can be encouraged to do so. And they can be authorized to take risks, in content and in style, without fear of failure.¹² For risk-taking is an inevitable precursor to growth. As Mina Shaughnessy has observed in Errors and Expectations, when students are trying something new in their writing they may, as a means of learning it, through "excess and exaggeration" overdo their discovery to the point of gaucherie.¹³ Yet once they've mastered it, they discover the joys and appropriateness of restraint.

Debra tested me out on this. About a month into the semester, when asked to write an extended metaphor, she took the deliberate risk of using a condom as her focal point, the specifics of which would have indeed brought a blush to the cheek of Dickens's young person. When she was in control of her subject, she treated it with stylistic distinction, but as she continued Rabelais gave way to raunch. I simply drew a line separating the controlled segment from the point of disintegration, wrote "Stop while you're brilliant!" in the margin--and waited for her reaction. With a whoop of surprised laughter she exclaimed, "I thought you'd hate it. But I wanted to say it that way and I didn't know how to stop." "O.K. , now revise it to keep the humor in and Deep Throat out." And so she did. That marked the turning point in her transformation from a fearful, conservative writer to an eager writer, willing to work long and diligently on the writing itself rather than at avoiding an inevitable conflict of paper and pen. She had taken a risk and won a sufficient validation of her attempt to know she could again be daring.

Discussing ways of transforming anxious writers into non-anxious writers, like talking about child rearing in the abstract, compresses and oversimplifies a complicated set of procedures that require considerable tact and perseverance on the instructor's part. Nevertheless, a semester in such a supportive milieu can not only bring about an enormous change of attitude on the students' part (their Writing Apprehensiveness scores drop fifteen-forty points by the semester's end, which puts them about on par with the scores of non-anxious writers), but it can also effect great changes in their composing processes. If students are doing writing they enjoy, and they know they will not be punished for it, they begin their composing processes sooner--thinking about the subject, investigating it, and actually writing, as Debra eventually did. Their time spent procrastinating is transformed into productive time, and their papers improve considerably.

Their willingness to revise becomes particularly striking. No longer do they regard it as a tortuous endeavor, throwing bad effort after bad. Instead, revision becomes a valuable expenditure of effort to make a paper with potential even better--and to communicate more effectively with an interested audience. As their anxiety lessens, the composing processes of formerly anxious writers will eventually approximate the composing processes of non-anxious writers in general.

The composing processes of Dan, Janice, and Raymond, all undergraduates, are typical of non-anxious writers. They look forward to writing, which they expect will be fun. They are confident in their ability to express themselves clearly, and although they realize that their writing will take effort, they like to discuss their work with teachers and friends. Although about one-third of non-anxious writers are fearful of the instructor's evaluation, this does not keep them from writing. Neither does what they sometimes erroneously assume is "procrastination," which means for some, "avoiding actually writing words."¹⁴ For many non-anxious writers, what they believe is procrastinating behavior is actually thinking behavior, the composing stage of invention. Says Raymond,

I can procrastinate and produce good papers only because I have time to think about the paper without writing. This does not mean that I waste the time before the paper is due; rather I spend time thinking about what direction the paper should take and about sentences to use in the paper. The amount of time spent in thought depends upon how much the theme interests me and how much free time I have. If I think of a particularly good sentence, I write it down. As a result, when I begin writing I am aware of the possible directions for the paper to take, and I have a good idea of what I want to say. The paper is almost written; I only have to put the words on paper.

Janice describes a composing process that is in many significant ways typical for herself and for many other non-anxious writers. Her own articulate analysis of the various phases of her composing process speaks for itself:

As an English major, the types of papers I am most likely to confront have descriptions like "Trace the development of . . ."; "Discuss the significance of" I have found that announcements of this type necessitate two responses. First, I need to consult my

calendar to make certain that I will have enough time to do my topic justice. (I have typed a very few papers at the last minute, wondering all the while if I might sleep better saving face by not turning anything in, and that's a very uncomfortable position to be in.) A week is usually sufficient for the actual writing. Secondly, I make a point to read the novel, etc. "creatively" at leisure, keeping an eye out for provocative or recurrent themes. I try not to order them at this point, but leave them to ferment in the back of my mind.

About ten days before the paper is due, I sit down with a yellow legal pad and print a few words describing my topic across the top. This will be followed by a list of major points and examples I find as I reread my source. I then form a tentative thesis which I copy onto the top of another sheet of legal paper. This is followed by a sketchy outline. The "collecting" phase usually takes the better part of an evening; the outline, probably an hour.

All this most likely takes place in my room, the environment I find most conducive to creative thought, if less so to steady workflow. At this stage, however, it is not steady workflow that matters. A series of interruptions may even improve the quality of my work; while I am visiting friends, going to the deli, etc. a part of my mind continues to work on the project at hand. All this is likely to take two nights of study time.

When I am ready to begin work in earnest, I take my yellow legal pad and several pencils with good-sized erasers to the library. The sterile environment of Swem may stifle my creativity, but it reminds me that it's time to get on to brass tacks. I begin writing--anything, everything, not worrying so much about quality as just to get the words on paper. My outlining is more of a map than a specific guide. This phase also usually takes the best part of two nights' study time. At the end of this stage I return to my room and see what I have. I meticulously prepare the first few paragraphs leading to my thesis statement. I draw up a final outline based on my material. I then take scissors and tape (partly for my own recreation) and patch up the final draft--changing wording, omitting entire paragraphs, condensing, adding explanatory paragraphs. This is usually done in my room, and takes another evening.

The night before the paper is due, I re-read it and type it. Generally my feelings are positive. If this has taken more trouble than studying for an equivalent midterm, it usually has been worth it. Instead of taking in all the knowledge I can hold as preventive medicine against the caprices of the instructor (the overstuffed feeling reminds me of forcing orange juice when I feel a cold coming on) I have had control of this project since its conception. Somehow, I feel that I have added my very small part to the sum of human knowledge.

Like many other non-anxious writers, Janice begins to consider her topic well in advance of the due date. She does the necessary reading and other investigation beforehand, reading "creatively, at leisure, keeping an eye out for provocative themes"--which she will let "ferment in the back of my mind" for awhile. When she works consciously with these themes, she will spend an evening generating ideas related to her topic. During this stage, considerable thinking is going on even while she is engaging in activities that have no direct bearing on the writing-- such as "visiting friends, going to the deli, etc."

I observed Janice, Dan, and Raymond during the next phase of the composing process, and found their behaviors amazingly similar--and a pleasure and inspiration to watch. Without any of the self-distracting or waste motions of the procrastinating anxious writers, these students got right down to work and remained totally engrossed in it. They were oblivious to my presence as an observer. The anxious writers would often interrupt their writing to talk to me; the non-anxious writers never did. They did not permit other students, telephone calls, or external events to disturb them, and worked in blocks of an hour or more; anxious writers averaged fifteen-twenty minutes in a block, if that.

By the time they actually started to write, the non-anxious writers had the fruits of their extensive preliminary reading and thinking at hand, for reference. These might have been organized according to an outline, or a format prescribed by an instructor. Material on notecards was arranged in piles according to topics. But none of these writers felt constrained by the chosen organizational format, which they regarded not as a cage but as composed of a configuration of guideposts that they could move at will. Their activities at this time often resembled those of an intense spectator at a tennis match; their glance would dart back and forth from the draft they were writing to their notes or outline and back again. Sometimes they would pause to review what they had written, ^{to} fish for a note in some other organizational sequence, or simply to think. Then it would be back and forth again, from writing to notes to writing.

Other than this active visual motion, and a fairly rapid writing rate punctuated by occasional consultations of notes, a dictionary, or other reference book, and by vigorous erasings or crossings out of what they'd been writing, these writers remained fairly stationary for extended periods. Unlike the anxious writers who fidgeted, paced the floor, turned on the stereo, ate, and made phone calls, these writers scarcely moved, even to the extent of keeping the same leg crossed over the other for a long time. They averaged the equivalent of $1\frac{1}{2}$ -2 typewritten pages per hour of work, and concentrated hard about 95% of the time. Although the anxious writers might produce the same number of words per minute as their non-anxious counterparts during the time they actually spent putting words on paper, they devote less of their "work" time to actually writing, and considerably more to procrastinating and self-distracting activities. Only about one-third of their time spent during a writing period is evidently productive, although there remains the possibility that they may be generating undetected ideas during this apparently fallow time. This does not necessarily mean that anxious writers take three times as long as non-anxious writers to produce finished papers of comparable length, though they may. It does mean that in a given amount of time, non-anxious writers can exploit various aspects of the composing process more fully and thereby do a more thorough job, often including extensive rewriting that is not common among anxious writers.

Throughout their writing processes, non-anxious writers are more purposeful than anxious writers; they can control how they behave as well as what they write better than anxious writers can. It is tempting to generalize and say that because of this control and a highly efficient scheduling and use of time that permits considerable thinking, organizing, writing, and rewriting, non-anxious writers write better than anxious writers do--though this is not necessarily the case. All other things being equal, they probably do; the non-anxious writers analyzed here write very well indeed.¹⁵

Into this neat and satisfying pattern must come exceptions, alas. Although ninety percent of the non-anxious students in my case study fit the above description, about ten percent do not. These people might be termed the "What, me worry?" kids--carefree writers who score very low on the Writing Apprehensiveness scale, but who should be more concerned, even more anxious, than they are. Their ease about writing belies a naïveté about composing processes designed to produce good papers; in their innocence there is bliss--to a point. Sam's self-analysis is typical:

When I get a writing assignment, I like to sit down immediately and write my paper/s. I go straight to my room and write the [first and only] draft. I can usually do this in about twenty-two minutes, or one album side. I do nearly all my papers this way

I get in my room and either flop on my bed or sit at the desk, depending on how tired my body is. The only preparation is choosing what record to listen to. I write my A papers when I listen to Bob Dylan, The Band, The Stones, and Bruce Springsteen. I have also written to a lot of other music, but the quality of my writing is at its peak when I listen to the above-named artists

I like to think of the topic in class or as soon as I sit down and then I blaze away. I like to write fluidly and freely, which leaves rough edges to my papers. I am willing to [put up with] these rough edges for the relative ease I have in writing.

Intrepid Sam "blazes away," enjoying what he's doing, believing that he writes very well, and confidently expecting that his readers (including the teacher) will know and love his writing as he does. They don't. At least, I don't. His papers for my writing course are superficial, skimpy, stylistically undistinguished, their numerous "rough edges" abrasive and unsightly.

However, in his concluding paragraph Sam indicates that he may sense the serpent lurking in his Garden of Eden. He acknowledges that "Recently, my patterns have been upturned. I find myself not following any of my usual steps and I feel less confident about my writing because of it." Class discussions about the composing process may be making some impact; so may conferences in which I've urged Sam to develop his ideas more fully and to spend more time on his writing. If so, by the semester's end Sam may be sadder, more anxious,

but wiser--and a better writer using a better process.

Thus an examination of the varied composing processes of anxious and non-anxious writers can tell us a great deal about writing that is useful both theoretically and pedagogically. It can show discrepancies between the writer's perception of the effectiveness of his composing process and the reality, or it can reaffirm their congruence. It can show anxious writers how to work more efficiently and effectively--which should help them to enjoy writing more fully. It can reinforce the capabilities and control of anxious and non-anxious writers alike. In such control lies maturity, the aim of any education.

Notes

1

See John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "Apprehension of Writing as a Predictor of Message Intensity," Journal of Psychology, 89 (1975), 177. Also raw data collected by Lynn Z. Bloom at the University of New Mexico, Spring, 1978; and at the College of William and Mary, fall, 1978-present; and by Martin Bloom at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, 1977, 78.

2

See Lynn Z. Bloom, "Identifying and Reducing Writing Anxiety, Part II: Writing Anxiety Workshops," in The Psychology of Composition, ed. Douglas R. Dutturff (Akron: Language and Style Books, University of Akron Press, 1980), pp. ; and Lynn Z. Bloom, "The Fear of Writing," William and Mary Alumni Gazette (Winter, 1980), 25-29.

3

John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English, 9 (1975), 242-248.

4

In this investigation, a high score connotes high anxiety about writing. Each of the twenty-six items on this scale can be rated from one (low) to five (high) on a five-point Likert scale; the maximum possible score is 130; the lowest is 26. I would reduce these maximum scores to 125 and 25, respectively, by eliminating item #8, "Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time." This is not predictive for college students and college graduates, all of whom value written expression even if they don't produce it.

5

The self-reports of participants in the Writing Anxiety Workshops consist of a daily record of their writing (or non-writing) behavior and attitudes on a simple checklist divided into such categories as "Finding things to do so as not to start writing," "Fearful that I may fail to write a 'good' paper," and "Environmental distractions occurred." This is supplemented by a daily written log in which the participants are asked to comment on how long they wrote, what aspects of the writing process they found easy or difficult, whether they wrote at a time of day or night when their productivity was likely to be at its peak, and what they thought of their writing when it was completed.

Similar information about the composition students was obtained as indicated above, top, p. 2, and through observations about their writing process recorded in their daily Writer's Notebooks, in which they wrote for the first ten weeks of the semester.

6

See Lynn Z. Bloom, "Myths and Mastery/ Teaching Anxious Writers: Implications and Applications of Research," Composition and Teaching, II (1979), pp. and table, pp.

7

In "Apprehension of Writing as a Predictor of Message Intensity" (n. 1, above), Daly and Miller found that the mean score of 98 undergraduates was 71.96, with a standard deviation of 18.15. They classified subjects with scores above 90 as high apprehensives," and those with scores below 54 as "low apprehensives (p. 177).

Because I am focusing more on behavioral evidence than on attitudes, as Daly and Miller do, I attach more significance to the items on their scale correlated with behavior, such as "I avoid writing," than to primarily attitudinal items. Daly and Miller's norms would classify many people, including many of the highly anxious participants in the Writing Anxiety Workshops, as within the

"normal" range even though they are clearly anxious, as their behavior strongly indicates.

8

Sharon Planko, in "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers," RTE, 13:1 (Feb. 1979), 5-22, calls this "rescanning." Her term essentially refers to the writer's actually looking over his work--often, a portion of a preceding sentence. Sometimes, however, writers simply sit and think about what they've been doing, without necessarily looking at it. "Reviewing" comprises both the physical rescanning and the mental reconsideration of completed writing.

9

For various controlled method studies of the composing process, see Sharon Planko (n. 8 above); Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," RTE, 13:4 (Dec. 1979), 317-336; and Ann Matsushashi and Charles Cooper, "A Video Time-Monitored Observational Study: The Transcribing Behavior and Composing Processes of a Competent High School Writer," presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Toronto, Ontario, March, 1978. In "Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes," John R. Hayes and Linda Flower explain yet another method of explicit, step-by-minute-step analysis of any given writer's composing process (see A Process Model of Composition, Technical Report I (May 1979), pp. 4-48. All of these are precise, flexible, and adaptable to various individual styles of composing. All are very time consuming and costly to record and analyze. Except for Planko's more general study, because of the minuteness of the analysis these latter three methods are perforce most appropriately applicable to observations of single individuals rather than of groups.

10

Yet they appear to be functioning well in the rest of their lives. The se Workshops do not provide psychotherapy; I refer people whose anxiety seems to be part of a larger set of problems to the appropriate counselors.

11

For a further discussion of this see Dennis Upper, "The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of Writer's Block," Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis, 7 (1974), 497. This consists of a blank page, with a reviewer's comment appended that he could "find nothing wrong with the manuscript."

12

It is significant that even Lynn, the high-achieving, appropriately confident writer of Janet Emig's extensive case study in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), consistently chose the safest, least innovative, least intellectually challenging options to write on. She wanted to write well and to "look good" in the interviewer's estimation, and in concentrating on what she knew she could do well--and routinely--she avoided taking any risks at all.

13

"Vocabulary," Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 193-194, 197-198.

14

It is on matters such as the interpretation of item #1, "I avoid writing," that the Daly and Miller Writing Apprehension scale lacks sensitivity. "I put off writing while I am thinking of what to say" is quite different from "I put off writing and avoid thinking about it altogether."

15

But all other things are not necessarily equal. A high proportion of the unusually anxious writers I have studied write very well. Many professional writers and editors, or English teachers who aspire to write, are anxious because, like medical students who "contract" each new disease they study, they are extraordinarily sensitive to everything that could go wrong. They know so much about the pitfalls of writing that they thoroughly inhibit themselves. Thus they find themselves in the plight of M. Grand in Camus's The Plague, who in continually seeking to perfect the prose in the novel that he has been struggling for months to write, can't get beyond the first, imperfect sentence. Even though Grand

spent "evenings, whole weeks . . . on one word . . . Sometimes on a mere conjunction!" he remained "fully aware that it didn't quite hit the mark as yet." (The Plague, tr. Stewart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 95-96.